Immortality and apeirophobia

The Makropulos Case - play by Karel Čapek / opera by Leoš Janáček

> *Philosophers who say: "after death a timeless state will begin", or: "at death a timeless state begins", and do not notice that they have used the words "after" and "at" and "begins" in a temporal sense, and that temporality is embedded in their grammar.*[1]
>
> – Ludwig Wittgenstein

Apart from whether it will ever be possible to live forever or even indefinitely – some people think it is or will be – *would it be desirable?* If so, why? If not, why not? In what sense, does *desire* have to be *fleeting* in order to be desirable? In fact, is "fleeting" built into the very idea of "desire"? Suppose you give people what they want, how long does their contentment last? How long *can* it last?

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The play by Karel Čapek, *The Makropoulos Affair*, published in 1922, was made into an opera by Leoš Janáček, shortly thereafter, and has just recently been revived by the Royal Ballet and Opera (2025). Back in the 1970s, it sparked a seminal paper on the subject of immortality by the British philosopher Bernard Williams that continues to stir controversy. Immortality is, of course, an ancient idea, largely connected with various religious belief systems, though there are secular

1. *Culture and Value*, 22e (1932, Winch trans, 1980).

"high-tech" versions such as "foreverism" that have emerged from philosophies of mind such as *functionalism* combined with ethical theories such as *consequentialism*. The notion is usually posited as a fact, or real possibility, or article of faith by some, or as nonsense by others. Most of the talk around the idea has been about its actuality or possibility. These are metaphysical concerns and not directly our subject for this occasion. Less often has anyone considered what living forever would *mean*. That's where Čapek's play and Williams' article come in.

Exploring the semantics of immortality will eventually run up against a major puzzle in contemporary ethical theory known as the Non-Identity Problem which has more immediate and practical implications for areas such as medical and environmental ethics.[2]

The Makropoulos Affair[3]

Born in 1585, Elina Makropoulos is 339 years old but appears to others like she is 30 at the time the play takes place in 1924. In her youth, her father came upon an "elixir of life" which freezes physical age for 300 years – after which, you must take it again... *if you still want to.* Her father, court physician to Holy Roman Emperor Rudolph II,[4] first offered the elixir to the Emperor who, suspecting it might poison him, entreated the physician to try it out on his own daughter, Elina. He does. The thing is: to learn if it works you may have to wait a lifetime. The Emperor, like everyone else, ages and dies, *waiting*. Meanwhile, she goes on… and on... to become (and remain) a strikingly beautiful woman, a phenomenally talented opera singer, wealthy, a much-loved and admired "rock star" of her time(s). By 1922, she has literally "seen and done it all" several times over – career, family, lovers, children…

But she has had to adopt a strategy to hide from others her secret. No one believes her explanation when those around her begin to notice she does not age. She must vanish from the scene and reappear in some other country with a different identity, speaking another language, essentially starting over but with the benefit (or curse) of *undying* hindsight. The appeal of living forever is starting to wear thin, its phenomenology exclusive to her. The loneliness of this. But, like most of us, she is afraid to die. Unlike us, she is saddled with a choice...

Elina Makropoulos (her Greek birth name) is compelled to take on several names and identities in succession in order to tolerate living for more than three centuries including:

- Elsa Muller (as German)
- Ellian MacGregor (as Scottish)
- Ekaterina Myskin (as Russian)

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2. We have touched on the problem of identity across time several times before. The fact that it keeps cropping up is a measure of its conceptual enormity, perhaps magnified by our technological boundary-pushing *together with* ever more mincing moral scruples. When we *could not* have envisioned – let alone, *been capable of*, doing more – *less* was expected of us. *Technology is not static, but neither are our moral sensitivities.* What was once the the norm, business as usual, is today criminal... Sexual and racial discrimination, treatments of animals and the disabled, sexual orientation, sexual identity, the proliferation of rights of this or that cohort to exist, to thrive, or rights to this or that privilege, from the right to life to the right to bodily autonomy… *to whether to be born at all is not the same as to be morally victimized*... Legal norms evolve to track the evolving moral allergies that underwrite them. Guess what will be deemed barbaric tomorrow… As we inch closer to ever-receding moral ideals, we approach extinction from politeness. I do not necessarily lament the development. I remark that it *self-justifies*.

3. The full text of the play *The Makropulos Affair*, (1922) by Karel Čapek and audio recording of the opera based on the play by Leoš Janáček are both at the Internet Archive. The title has been variously translated as "Affair," "Case," or "Secret," and "Makropoulos" sometimes appears as "Makropulos."

4. Rudolf II (1552 – 1612) was a well-documented patron of the sciences, both occult and, by present day standards, respectable. Čapek's play is, of course, fiction, but Rudolf II's interest in such an elixir would have been plausible.

- Eugenie Montez (as Spanish)
- Emilia Marty (as Czech)

At the time of the play, she is Emilia.

Excerpts from the dialogue of the third act

Emilia has been evading questions about how she can know things with confidence that happened centuries earlier. Now she is subject to a mock trial because of a jealous intrigue in which a young man (the son of an aristocratic lover, Count Prus, she has just spent the night with) committed suicide over her. Indeed, the whole trial is a carnival of jealousy since nearly all the males involved are smitten with her.

> KOLONATY **[an attorney representing Berti Gregor in his case involving a will gone missing a century earlier that would enrich him but whose whereabouts *only* Emilia mysteriously knows]**
>
> Well, upon my word! And who was your father?
>
> EMILIA **[aka, Elina, Elsa… etc.]**
>
> Hieronymus Makropoulos, the personal physician of Emperor Rudolph II...
>
> EMILIA **[to GREGOR, who comes on to her, not knowing her relation to him]**
>
> I am your great-grandmother, or something like that. Ferdi was my boy. Do you understand?…

Not surprisingly, no one believes her at first. She is cold, jaded, blasé in dismissing Gregor's overtures, as though she has been fending off suitors for centuries – which, in fact, *she has*… Gregor misinterprets her sudden inexplicable appearance to help his case. He fancies she might be driven by an attraction to him, though she behaves as though she is discharging a blind duty that she owes but barely feels.

> ...
>
> HAUK-SENDORF **[Max, one of her former young lovers, now pathetically senile, for whom Emilia still harbors some feelings]**
>
> And — and excuse me, but you are Eugenie Montez?
>
> EMILIA
>
> I was, Max; I was. But then I was only two hundred and ninety years old; and I was also Ekatorina Myskina, and Elsa Muller and all the others. [*Turning to the others*] One cannot live with you more than thirty years at a time.
>
> ...
>
> EMILIA
>
> Oh, I simply cannot be bothered with my brats.
>
> …
>
> VITECK **[court clerk]**

Did you have any more children?

EMILIA

About twenty, I think. One loses count...

...

EMILIA

Ennui. No, it isn't that. It's —oh, you people have no name for it. There's no name for it in any tongue. Bombita used to talk about it, too — it's terrible…

GREGOR

What is it?

EMILIA

I don't know. Everything is so dull, empty and ordinary. Are you all here? It seems as if you were not—as if you were things or shadows…

Ennui – boredom, tedium? No, these are moods that afflict those who can *remember vividly* what it was like to be engaged and can, at least, *imagine* the possibility of future immersion in distraction and engagement. What she, *and she almost alone*, experiences there is no name for among mortals. For her, there is no one to share this experience with, except for oblique references to a scarce few beside herself who had access to the elixir and have also been condemned to haunt the world as perennial voyeurs to other people's drama (like "Bombita").

EMILIA

God! There is no word for it. Then one doesn't believe in anything. Not in anything! And from it comes that ennui. Berti, you used to say that I sang as if I were frozen. You see, art has meaning only so long as one doesn't understand; ...but when [one] understands one sees that singing is the same as keeping silent. Everything is the same. There is no difference in anything.

Art has meaning because of its power to transport, at least momentarily. For perennial voyeurs, like her, *there is no place to be transported to that has not been visited countless times before*.[5] She is burdened with this understanding. Perhaps the *very perfection* of her art, what permitted her this perfection, is precisely a thorough acquaintance with what happens that her audience cannot have and so cannot be afflicted by. She must forgive them for they *cannot* know what she knows. But forgiveness is wearing when existence offers an unending stream of items needing it.

VITEK

That's not true. When you sing — then people are moved to something better and higher.

EMILIA

People are never better. Nothing can ever change. Nothing matters. Nothing can ever. If there were an explosion now, or an earthquake, if the end of the world were

5. The notion of *repetition* invoked by Kierkegaard is an *ethical* one. It is not aesthetic or religious or transcendental. It is something you *owe* in virtue of being alive. It is the *ultimate* burden. Only death relieves it. Emilia *feels* it with unrelieved vengeance.

here, nothing would matter. Even I do not matter. You are here and I am far away — away from everything. Three hundred years — oh, God, if you only knew how easy it is for you to live! Vitek. Everyone, everyone believes in everything
You — fools!

VITEK
But, why, there are — higher values — ideals.

EMILIA
Yes, but only for you. How shall I tell you? Love there may be, but it is only in you. As soon as it is not, then there is no love — nowhere in the universe. And one cannot love for three hundred years. It does not last. Everything is irksome. It is tiresome to be bad and tiresome to be good. Heaven and earth tire one. And then you find out that there truly is none. Nothing exists—neither sin, nor pain, nor desire — absolutely nothing. Only that exists which has some feeling. And for you, everything has feeling. Oh, God, I was like you once. I was a girl; I had faith; I was happy. God in heaven!

HAUK-SENDORF
What? What's happened to you?

EMILIA
If you could only understand what Bombita said to me! We old ones know altogether too much. But you have more than we, you fools! Infinitely more! You have everything. Why, you couldn't wish for anything more. You live, but in us life has stopped. And it cannot go on! God, what loneliness!

PRUS **[Emilia's aristocratic current lover, father of the suicided boy]**
Why did you come here — for the Makropoulos secret? Why do you want to live longer?

EMILIA
[*Quietly, almost in a whisper*] Because I am afraid to die.

PRUS
So even an immortal isn't spared that?

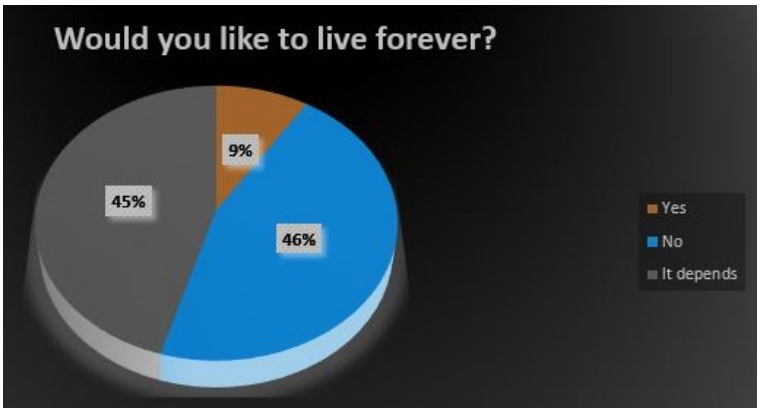
EMILIA
No.
[*A pause*]

Once Elina's secret is out and everyone is finally convinced, there ensues among those present a three way dispute over what to do with the formula for the elixir: The lawyer (Kolonaty) sees tremendous commercial opportunity, selling, say, decades of life, discounted if you bought a century at a time; the more generous spirit (Vitek) wants to open source the formula, seeing in it a great gift to humanity, let everyone partake of eternal life; and another (Prus) sees waste in perpetuating mediocrity and riffraff, only the best, most productive, the superior sort should have their life extended… But Gregor – perhaps, coming to realize the depth of Elina's tragedy – hints that maybe it would be best not to release it at all...

A minor character, at the start, a young woman Kristina (the bereaved girlfriend of the young suicide), emerges near the end of the play in a critical role. She sets fire to the parchment with the secret formula, seeing the distress of the older people quarreling over the wisdom of taking, or not taking, the elixir. She is young and immortality means little to her. Caught up in dreams of an open future, the thought of there *not being enough time* to realize them does not oppress her as it does them.

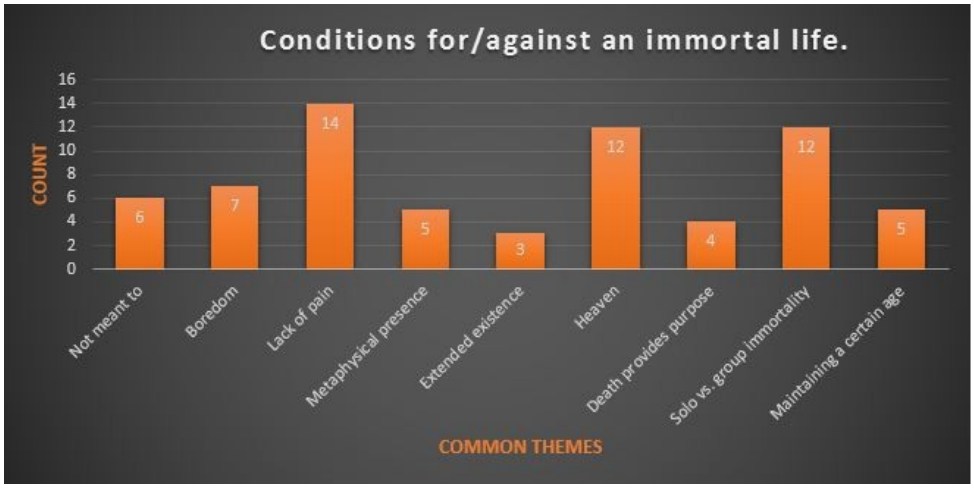
So what do people think about living forever when asked?

According to a survey conducted at Ohio State University, most[6] dismiss the desirability of living forever outright. Only a small minority offer an unqualified *yes*. But a sizable number say *maybe*.



Immortality survey OSU

Depending on what? Their concerns, according to the survey, are ranked here:



Most worries seem transparent: that immortality not involve unending pain, that you are not alone in your immortality (also illustrated in the Makropulos case). Apparently, happiness (not just

6. To my slight surprise... since my intuitions are inveterately contrarian, I expected to be in the minority on this question. I expected the naysayers to be closer to the nine percent, and that most would embrace immortality flat out given the choice… I suspect that people who veer toward bright side (which is most) in their overall judgment of life find eventually (if not from the start) some peace with their mortality. It would make sense evolutionarily. This is not an argument for such an attitude, merely an observation. Those like Sophie Grace and Anders Sandberg, discussed in the Appendix, who stress the rational possibility of surmounting apeirophobia, remain optimists (unlike myself) but about our rational capablities.

misery) loves company. Nice thought... Boredom is up there, too, but not among the most pressing…

But *heaven* is the least humanly transparent worry from the list because of its vagueness. It is the most dogmatically dependent, and invites more clarification. *How must one envision heaven to rank it so highly?* Perhaps its rank is just an artifact of the survey having been conducted in the community it was (the American Midwest)? But, still, what features of heaven could map onto human desires as we commonly know them? Leaving aside caricatures like reclining on clouds, eating grapes, and listening to harp music for an eternity, what could heaven *possibly* be like to engage human interest? Not the interest of abstract souls excised from bodies? Since belief in such is a leap too specialized to offer comfort or consolation to one whose consciousness and intellect was reared on only mundane experience...

Let me be clear: I do *not* dismiss outright mystical experience or belief or faith in God or the supernatural. I think of atheism as just another belief system that estranges me. How could one *not* believe in something one could not *also* believe in? I admit to a doxastic disability. I look to animals and notice they seem to function well enough without manifesting propositional beliefs (as opposed to behavioral dispositions) of any sort. A cat or a cockroach will munch on its prey or nibble at its crumbs, as far as I can tell, with no heterocosmic thought. Most of the time this describes me, too. I have bouts of wonder but these have never garnered anything resembling what people call "conviction." God may exist, or may not. If God appeared in front of me as clearly as the sight of my two hands,[7] I – the "I" I recognize, the mundane one – would think something was wrong with me. Another, *transfigured*, "I" might experience differently. But what would make me identify with this transfigured "I"? I don't know, but I think the break in continuity would be a break in identity. I could only wish this newer, born again, "I" well in their belief, but could not follow them.

But, equally, I don't get where atheists get their surety about anything. I don't need to believe in the natural, let alone supernatural, to partake of the fascination and sometimes usefulness the empirical world of science has, since I was a child, offered me. Like the cat or the cockroach… As long as it makes *mundane* sense. I know no other "sense." But I am happy to admit that from a perspective inaccessible to me, I may be utterly mistaken. I just cannot imagine having that perspective from where, it seems, I am now. Like the cat or cockroach, whether the second law of thermodynamics or the law of excluded middle or whether it is really wrong to kill or whether there really is beauty in a sunset, these are not propositions or queries that I am equipped to have "convictions" about. It suffices me that sometimes these and a million other experiences "fit" my world tolerably well. Sometimes. Or often enough.

I am "full of it," therefore I am... Descartes seemed superhuman to me in his conviction. Or maybe I am *sub*human? My modest *cogito*, I realize, is every bit as arrogant as Descartes'.

All modesty is false. There – that's a conviction I sometimes harbor when I am feeling secure.

Notes and comments on Bernard Williams' essay, "The Makropulos case: reflections on the tedium of immortality"[8]

7. As assurance of the reality of the external world did to G. E. Moore.
8. *Problems of the Self*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (1973).

It is not worth the bother of killing yourself, since you always kill yourself *too late*.[9]

– E. M. Cioran

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> I shall rather pursue the idea that from facts about human desire and happiness and what a human life is, it follows both that immortality would be, where conceivable at all, intolerable, and that (other things being equal) death is reasonably regarded as an evil. **[Caught between two evils.]**
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> 83
> Notoriously, there have been found two contrary bases on which that claim can be mounted: death is said by some not to be an evil because it is not the end, and by others, because it is…
>
> The fear of death, it is suggested, must necessarily be the fear of some experiences had when one is dead. But if death is annihilation, then there are no such experiences: in the Epicurean phrase, [84] when death is there, we are not, and when we are there, death is not. So, death being annihilation, there is nothing to fear. The second argument addresses itself directly to the question of whether one dies earlier or later, and says that one will be the same time dead however early or late one dies, and therefore one might as well die earlier as later. And from both arguments we can conclude *nil igitur mors est ad nos, neque pertinet hilum* – death is nothing to us, and does not matter at all.

We might conclude this, but it certainly doesn't follow strictly from the validity of Epicurus' argument. All that follows is that death *cannot be an experience* for the person dead. *Mattering* is another matter, literally. Things may *matter to me* that can never be an *experience for me*. E.g., the subjective experiences of others – via "empathetic imagination." (*Cf.*, for example, Samuel Scheffler's *The Afterlife*.)

Not being an "experience" for me, it cannot enter in, or contribute to, *my* identity – the thing, whatever it may be, I take myself to be at the moment I am considering this.

Hence, for me to claim a life extension – and perforce, an immortality – that encompasses future experiential states not part of my identity is irrational. (Insofar as I am merely a human animal, I may not be all the worse for being irrational. We underestimate how far from rational being human is.) But this must *not* be taken to exclude *caring* about these future states, only that my identity does not enter into this *care*. The caring is tied to my identity *in this moment*, and the moment lasts for as long as I lay claim to inhabit it. (The dead, I take it, cannot make claims.)

Alternatively, we may re-define or expand "identity" to mean identity *with* a substrate of a sort, a material one, for instance, identity with the items comprising me ultimately accessible to physics;[10] *or* to a non-material phenomenology, e.g., mental states; *or* to something heterocosmic, cosmically ineffable, such as a "soul." *Or*, from the standpoint of a less atomized moral metaphysics where one primarily exists *as an amorphous social creature* in which *self expansion* is the basis for empathetic concern.[11]

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9. *The Trouble With Being Born*, Seaver Books, (1973), p. 32.
10. As Carl Sagan famously did, and found some solace in doing so.
11. As in variants of moral sense theory (David Hume *et al.*) or as in sex-determined moral psychological theories such

In which case, we assert extended identity by lexical fiat...

Empathetic imagination may operate even within the span of *one* supposedly continuous self. I may care about the person I can imagine myself being in the future, *that* person's joy or suffering, not because of a pressing identity with, as yet, this hypothetical being but because, even if I concede the non-identity, I may care about them, this future person I affiliate with, as I would *another* person altogether. Similarly, with the pride or credit, shame or blame, in a past deed I take responsibility for: I am responsible because I *assert* responsibility. A supposed pre-existing identity is phenomenologically superfluous to responsibility.

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> Thoughts about his total absence from the world would have to be of a different kind, impersonal reflections on the value for the world of his presence or absence: of the same kind, essentially, as he could conduct (or, more probably, not manage to conduct) with regard to anyone else. While he can think egoistically of what it would be for him to live longer or less long, he cannot think egoistically of what it would be for him never to have existed at all. Hence the sombre words of Sophocles 'Never to have been born counts highest of all...' are well met by the old Jewish reply - 'how many are so lucky? Not one in ten thousand.'
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> But now – if death, other things being equal, is a misfortune; and a longer life is better than a shorter life; and we reject the Lucretian argument that it does not matter when one dies; then it looks as though – other things always being equal – death is at any time an evil, and it is always better to live than die. Nagel indeed, from his point of view, does seem to permit that conclusion, even though he admits some remarks about the natural term of life and the greater misfortune of dying in one's prime. But wider consequences follow. For if all that is true, then it looks as though it would be not only always better to live, but better to live always, that is, never to die. If Lucretius is wrong, we seem committed to wanting to be immortal.
>
> … Against this, I am going to suggest that the supposed contingencies are not really contingencies; that an endless life would be a meaningless one; and that we could have no reason for living eternally a human life. There is no desirable or significant property which life would have more of, or have more unqualifiedly, if we lasted for ever.

The "supposed contingencies" – that the moments of life be *each* desirable, either in themselves or as tolerable requirements for future moments that are desirable, are *necessary* for the desirability of future moments, whether the succession of moments is finite or infinite. This means that at any point should these contingencies fail – a single moment of unredeemable boredom, say – then the argument for the desirability of any further moment cannot be made. *One break in the chain of justifiably desirable moments is fatal.* In other words, we live as long as we do because of a hope or faith that we have reason to believe tomorrow will be bearable. To *know or be convinced* that

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as that developed by Carol Gilligan's classic book *In a Different Voice*. On something like these theories empathy is a form of identity projection. The transcendence of self-interest beyond immediate personal consequence also connects with Samuel Scheffler views on the value of lives to us lived *after* ours is over. Even so, all such views would acknowledge limits to the reach of empathetic imagination. We have to believe, at this point, these limits are bio-psychological consequences: they have an evolutionary history. It has always behooved us to care about others not ourselves or outside our immediate orbit – *to a point*… But acknowledging the potentially expansive reach of empathetic imagination does not get us anywhere near concern for immortal selves, ours or those of others.

tomorrow will *not* be bearable, but the day after tomorrow will be and expect we should "bear with ourselves" across a hiatus of the unbearable, will not help. If we survived yesterday, it is because it *was* bearable – however horrible yesterday was.

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[Generalized immortality...] EM, of course, is in a world of people who do not share her condition, and that determines certain features of the life she has to lead, as that any personal relationship requires peculiar kinds of concealment. That, at least, is a form of isolation which would disappear if her condition were generalised. But to suppose more generally that boredom and inner death would be eliminated if everyone were similarly becalmed, is an empty hope: it would be a world of Bourbons, learning nothing and forgetting nothing, and it is unclear how much could even happen.

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[Not just any life, but *my* life… The identity condition.] It also satisfied one of two important conditions which must be satisfied by anything which is to be adequate as a fulfilment of my anti-Lucretian hope, namely that it should clearly be me who lives for ever. The second important condition is that the state in which I survive should be one which, to me looking forward, will be adequately related, in the life it presents, to those aims which I now have in wanting to survive at all. … [92] that any image I have of those future desires should make it comprehensible to me how in terms of my character they could be my desires.

...The problem remains of whether this series of psychologically disjoint lives could be an object of hope to one who did not want to die.

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[a suicide contemplation]...If we could allow the idea that he could fear pain which was going to occur in that life, then we have at least provided him with one kind of reason which might move him to opt out of that life, and destroy himself (being recurrent, under conditions of bodily continuity, would not make one indestructible). But physical pain and its nastiness are to the maximum degree independent of what one's desires and character are, and the degree of identification needed with the later life to reject that aspect of it is absolutely minimal. Beyond that point, however, it is unclear how he is to bring this later character and its desires into a relation to his present ones, so as to be satisfied or the reverse with this marginal promise of continued existence. If he can regard this future life as an object of hope, then equally it must be possible for him to regard it with alarm, or depression, and – as in the simple pain case – opt out of it. … For if we – or he – merely wipe out his present character and desires, there is nothing left by which he can judge it at all, at least as something for him; while if we leave them in, we – and he – apply something irrelevant to that future life, since (to adapt the Epicurean phrase), when they are there, it is not, and when it is there, they are not.

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The serial and disjoint lives are at least more attractive than the attempt which some have made, to combine the best of continuous and of serial existence in a fantasy of very varied lives which are nevertheless cumulatively effective in memory. This might be called the *Teiresias* model. As that case singularly demonstrates, it has the quality of a fantasy, of emotional pressure trying to combine the uncombinable. One thing that the fantasy has to

> ignore is the connexion, both as cause and as consequence, between having one range of experiences rather than another, wishing to engage in one sort of thing rather than another, and having a character. Teiresias cannot have a character, either continuously through these proceedings, or cumulatively at the end (if there were to be an end) of them: he is not, eventually, a person but a phenomenon.

The case of the "phenomenon" Teiresias

Thus, the humor in the story of Teiresias' "trans" experience: Zeus and Hera were having a quarrel over which, a woman or a man, enjoyed sex more. Each was sure the other enjoyed it more. Sensibly, they consulted Teiresias, a biological male at birth, but who, having offended a god, was "punished" by being turned into a woman and "condemned" to live life as a woman for a long time, but sometime later he was "forgiven" by another god, and turned back into a man. Surely, thought Zeus and Hera, "he," formerly "she," that is, Teiresias, would know the answer to the question bothering them. Teiresias must have hesitated, no doubt wanting relief from further "sexual harassment" (so to speak) by gods and not sure which answer would achieve this best, before he finally answered: "a woman." This answer angered Hera, puffed up Zeus, and their quarrel continued...

But, returning to Teiresias's plight and the interpretation of it relevant here (Teiresias as "phenomenon," not person), having supposedly experienced both sides, there was no *continuity* between these experiences. *There was no one, nobody present, no sexless substrate, persisting through the two sets of experiences*: when he was a man, he was a man, when a woman, a woman. At no point was there an "objective" *identity* persisting through the experiences. Teiresias's answer, to sharpen the humor of her/his predicament, amounted to either a coin toss or was conditioned by whichever sex[12] he/she happened to be when asked. (The tale would have lost its charm absent this assumption.)

Tiresias strikes two mating snakes, offending a god, resulting in his being transformed into woman. Then, later, she is transformed back into a man at the whim of another god with a different politics about tampering with mating snakes.

Similarly, a supposed future "self," in whose causal history I figure arbitrarily and which purports to be me, cannot be a matter much involving identity for the "me" claiming the same identity at an earlier moment. The history must be the one I am in a position to claim. This makes it contingent upon how I *feel* about it. *If I am bored*, enough of me survived across change for me to desire the boredom end. *If I am not bored*, it means nothing or not enough of me has survived to recall ever having experienced this before; it may as well be new to me, or me new to it. Either way, life extension or immortality is *not* desirable, *or* it *is* desirable, just *not to one and the same* persistent subject.

> In general we can ask, what it is about the imaged activities of an eternal life which would stave off the principle hazard to which EM succumbed, boredom. The Don Juan in Hell joke, that heaven's prospects are tedious and the devil has the best tunes, though a tired fancy in itself, at least serves to show up a real and (I suspect) a profound difficulty, of

12. Here, as elsewhere, I avoid the fashionable term "gender" for discussions where biological dioeciousness is referenced as opposed to "social construction." Social constructions are real enough, but, in this context, misleading.

providing any model of an [95] unending, supposedly satisfying, state or activity which would not rightly prove boring to anyone who remained conscious of himself and who had acquired a character, interests, tastes and impatiences in the course of living, already, a finite life. The point is not that for such a man boredom would be a tiresome consequence of the supposed states or activities, and that they would be objectionable just on the utilitarian or hedonistic ground that they had this disagreeable feature. If that were all there was to it, we could imagine the feature away, along no doubt with other disagreeable features of human life in its present imperfection. The point is rather that boredom, as sometimes in more ordinary circumstances, would be not just a tiresome effect, but a reaction almost perceptual in character to the poverty of one's relation to the environment. Nothing less will do for eternity than something that makes boredom unthinkable. What could that be? Something that could be guaranteed to be at every moment utterly absorbing? But if a man has and retains a character, there is no reason to suppose that there is anything that could be that. If, lacking a conception of the guaranteedly absorbing activity, one tries merely to think away the reaction of boredom, one is no longer supposing an improvement in the circumstances, but merely an impoverishment in his consciousness of them. Just as being bored can be a sign of not noticing, understanding or appreciating enough, so equally not being bored can be a sign of not noticing, or not reflecting, enough. One might make the immortal man content at every moment, by just stripping off from him consciousness which would have brought discontent by reminding him of other times, other interests, other possibilities.

96
Some philosophers have pictured an eternal existence as occupied in something like intense intellectual enquiry. Why that might seem to solve the problem, at least for them, is obvious. The activity is engrossing, self-justifying, affords, as it may appear, endless new perspectives, and by being engrossing enables one to lose oneself. It is that last feature that supposedly makes boredom unthinkable, by providing something that is, in that earlier phrase, at every moment totally absorbing. But if one is totally and perpetually absorbed in such an activity, and loses oneself in it, then as those words suggest, we come back to the problem of satisfying the conditions that it should be me who lives for ever, and that the eternal life should be in prospect of some interest.

98
With this loss, under the Spinozist conception **[as expounded by Stuart Hampshire]**, of the individual's character, there is, contrary to Hampshire's claim., a loss of individuality itself, and certainly of anything that could make an eternity of intellectual activity, so construed, a reasonable object of interest to one concerned with individual immortality.

100
It is not necessarily the prospect of pleasant times that create the motive against dying, but the existence of categorical desire, and categorical desire can drive through both the existence and the prospect of unpleasant times.

Suppose, then, that categorical desire does sustain the desire to live. So long as it remains so, I shall want not to die. Yet I also know, if what has gone before is right, that an eternal life would be unliveable. In part, as EM's case originally suggested, that is because categorical desire will go away from it: in those versions, such as hers, in which I am recognisably myself, I would eventually have had altogether too much of myself. There are good reasons, surely, for dying before that happens. But equally, at times earlier than that moment, there is reason for not dying. Necessarily, it tends to be either too early or too late. EM reminds us

> that it can be too late, and many, as against Lucretius, need no reminding that it can be too early. If that is any sort of dilemma, it can, as things still are and if one is exceptionally lucky, be resolved, not by doing anything, but just by dying shortly before the horrors of not doing so become evident. Technical progress may, in more than one direction, make that piece of luck rarer. But as things are, it is possible to be, in contrast to EM, *felix opportunitate mortis* – as it can be appropriately mistranslated, lucky in having the chance to die.

Williams sees a dilemma in trying to rationally conceive immortality.

Vampire logic

A vampire may, as one commentator suggests, develop a taste for atheists... In Werner Herzog's film *Nosferatu*, Dracula is eager to leave backward Transylvania for "enlightened" England. He acquires the soul and identity of those whose lifeblood he consumes. For an atheist, there is no God, hence no expectation of immortality, hence no eternal condemnation to live, hence a prescribed end to his eternal suffering from eternal desire. To "desire" implies not having. To not have is to suffer... Eating believers, creatures desirous of eternal life, has led to eternal indigestion. Thus:

DRACULA: "My God, I can't wait to eat some atheists." (as paraphrased in the Netflix rendition)[13]

Dracula wants to make "nothing burgers," so to speak, out of atheists. Their nutritional value may be lacking, but he seems to have had enough of value. As well one might after so long.

Herzog says of his version of Dracula/Nosferatu:

> I tried to humanize him by presenting the vampire as an agonized, sad and lonely creature, desperately thirsty for love, but terrifying at the same time. I wanted to endow him with human suffering, with a true longing for love and, importantly, the one essential capacity of human beings: mortality... He is deeply pained by his solitude and inability to join with the rest of humanity, by his profound terror of forever remaining undead. The vampire isn't realistic, but he is human.[14]

Wittgenstein on immortality

There's no name for it in any tongue.

– Emilia Marty

Passage from the *Tractatus* (6.43 - 6.4312):

> And the will as a phenomenon is only of interest to psychology.
>
> If good or bad willing changes the world, it can only change the limits of the world, not the facts; not the things that can be expressed in language.
>
> In brief, the world must thereby become quite another, it must so to speak wax or wane as a whole.

13. According to Storylosopher.
14. "Comparing every version *Nosferatu*."

> The world of the happy is quite another than that of the unhappy.
>
> As in death, too, the world does not change, but ceases.
>
> Death is not an event of life. Death is not lived through.
>
> If by eternity is understood not endless temporal duration but timelessness, then he lives eternally who lives in the present.
>
> Our life is endless in the way that our visual field is without limit.

What you can see, you can see. What you can't, you can't. You have no grasp and *can have no grasp* of what it is like to live forever – except, of course, by thinking of such a life as *being like* some moment or moments you *have* experienced or *are* experiencing. But these moments are *not* sampling an "eternal life."[15] Thus, nothing is hidden from your view. There isn't a thing anywhere *to be hidden* from your view. Something must be hidden *first* before it can be hidden from *you*. A taste of immortality cannot exist in order to be obscured from your *constitutionally* mortal view. It is not part of your world. *There must be something it is like to be immortal.* Whatever, *that* is is what is missing in accounts of everlasting life.

> The temporal immortality of the human soul, that is to say, its eternal survival also after death, is not only in no way guaranteed, but this assumption in the first place will not do for us what we always tried to make it do. Is a riddle solved by the fact that I survive for ever? Is this eternal life not as enigmatic as our present one? The solution of the riddle of life in space and time lies outside space and time.

Wittgenstein's philosophy, both early and late, was built around demarcating limits to what we may think without gassing – *limits*, whether determined by logic or language.[16] The literal notion of "forever" is not rooted in everyday usage. No mundane function of living invokes the concept to succeed. We don't need it to eat, drink, defecate, reproduce, rest, or lift an object or raise a fist. When it appears in discourse (as with related notions such as "infinity") it is metaphorical; like poetry, it is about expressing the *literally* inexpressible. It is hand-waving when lucid words fail.

The characterization is not meant to deprecate or relegate to insignificance – rather, perhaps, the very opposite. It is just to say the mundane may fill up an entire biological life; the span of experiences book-ended by conception and decomposition require no more. The physical/material world with all its items cataloged and their relations made into propositions apt for logical manipulation is self-contained. "Foreverness," whatever it gestures at, is superfluous. Or would be if we could truly confine ourselves to animality.[17]

We stray from animality when we say things like "love is sweet" or that it is like a rose.[18] Love is not sweet, or bitter or anything of the sort. Sugar is sweet. Kale is bitter. Love has no taste, let alone a pleasant or painful one. And it is not at all like a rose. Except that we, infected with reflective consciousness, come to perceive it as *like* a rose. We *compare* experiences less tangible with those

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15. Every moment of a *mortal* life is consciously, or not, demarcated by mortality.
16. In this respect, he has been rightly compared to Kant.
17. e e cummings' love poem "it may not always be so" captures the inexorable imaginative flight from the ecstatic animal-here-and-now into a poignant past tense, as does Bruno Miranda's musical evocation.
18. Or Jimmy Webb's allusion to a glass of wine perched on the side rail of a ship in a raging storm in "Asleep on the Wind."

more tangible. In fact, “love is like a rose” is doubly flirting with nonsense, since love is not even a thing in itself, let alone open to being *like* any other thing, in the way, say, an apple is a thing, apart from anything else it is like, while still capable of sharing some features with an orange, e.g., sweetness. Apples and oranges do not require much imagination to conceive. That a materially nonexistent abstracted pattern of behavior and sentiment – love – should resemble a carmine and spicular one is a testament to something about us it is open to see as wonderful or lamentable – as it suits us. These sentiments found our criteria for judgment. They correspond to nothing *out there* that we have access to. This is what Wittgenstein is gesturing at.

To say love is like a rose is to depart from reality – from the world language evolved to demarcate and manipulate. Likewise, we stray very far from animality to conjure a string of experiences with no end. Nothing has prepared to us say much about the possibility, forget the probability.

This is why, if to live forever is to have experiences like those I am having now without cease, then it is to live in an eternal present. Where there is no time, past or future. If only our imagination could rest content so constrained. Imagination, as in metaphor, requires comparison, one thing with another, and this, in turn, requires the experience of change.

And if to live forever is to have, *not* the *same* experiences I am having now, but ones *like* them, then this presupposes there is something that endures *and* with which I identify. This thing persists through experiences and is equipped to make the comparisons. To compare *before* with *after* it must span both. This perduring thing could not change too unrecognizably. That means its duration would be limited. Which contradicts the assumption of foreverness. If whatever perdures, does so only for a spell before it transitions to another state without continuity, or with an ever-receding memory of one, then again in what way is this appreciably different from the finitude or mortality we are intimately familiar with?

Perhaps, we would be happy with just *life-extension*, not immortality. Extended how far? Until it becomes unbearable? Don’t we have that already? If through illness, accident, or age, my life comes to feel a burden, it implies my life *was*, in fact, *extended* up until that point. Is what I want that it be extended *again*, until it becomes unbearable *again?* How many times? And why that many?…

Elina Makropoulos was asking.

Get the calculation wrong and we die too soon or too late. The right moment to die is the instant *before* you *want* to die. As Cioran, put it, this is the reason for a suicide’s failure. An eternal life would be to risk this failure forever.

[i]n philosophy all that is not gas is grammar[19]

– Wittgenstein

Remembering and *anticipating*, time-bound activities, are characteristic of a perduring, awake entity. *Imagining* covers the rest.

?

In the end, there are two problems with immortality or indefinite life extension:

19. *Wittgenstein’s Lectures 1930–1932*, ed. Desmond Lee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 112.

- the boredom problem, and
- the non-identity problem.

The first seems to require that we must change to tolerate repetition, the second entails that if we change, whatever perdures, it is not us.

Resources

The Makropulos case *against* living forever:

- "Philosophy and Death | Bernard Williams," Dave Egan Philosophy (video).
- "The Makropulos case: reflections on the tedium of immortality," Bernard Williams, from *Problems of the Self*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973.
- "Bernard Williams | The Makropulos Case: reflections on the tedium of immortality," Victor Gijsbers (video).
- *The Makropulos Affair*, (1922) full text of the play by Karel Čapek; audio recording of the opera based on the play by Leoš Janáček; both at the Internet Archive.[20]
- "Insights: *The Makropulos Case*," discussion of the 2025 Royal Ballet and Opera production.

The case *for*:

- "We Should Want Immortality | John Martin Fischer," Mark Oppenheimer and Jason Werbeloff, *Brain in a Vat,* (video).
- "The frightening infinite spaces: apeirophobia," Anders Sandberg, *Andart II*, 2017.
- "Staying alive," Sophie Grace, The Open University.
- "A stealthy Harvard startup wants to reverse aging in dogs, and humans could be next, biologist George Church says the idea is to live to 130 in the body of a 22-year-old," *MIT Review*, Antonio Regalado, 2018.

More relevant resources:

- "Philosophy 2465 Survey | Death and the Meaning of Life," what people say about living forever, OSU.
- "The Prescience of Karel Čapek," lecture by Thomas Ort at CUNY, 2025. Ort reviews Čapek's work in the historical context of the 1920-1930s and considers him more an important satirist of human pretension and less a science fiction writer, as he is still often recalled. Though rooted in the political conditions of his time, his themes run much deeper than any time or place. Whether his themes prefigure modern technologies such as AI,

20. Other literary classics examining the dark side of human nature: "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" by Ursula K. Le Guin, (1973), and "The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson, (1948).

genetic engineering, viruses and vaccines, or – as in *The Makropulos Case*, he fleshes out provocative "what-if" thought experiments exposing human confusion about what we *really* want.

- "The Strangest Idea in Science: Quantum Immortality," *Cool Worlds'* David Kipping astronomer and astrostatistician, explains how *a kind* of immortality may be a consequence of quantum mechanics. The metaphysics of the possibility and actuality of immortality isn't strictly relevant to our topic – which is the *desirability* of the possibility, not its actuality – but, if one of the premier theories of the physical world is correct, we may not have a choice. There is a sense of "we" in which "we" are *condemned* to live forever because the concatenation of the logical possibility *and* the "many worlds theory" (falling out of quantum mechanics) entails it – *desirably or not.* It's not an either/or. We will die also: *both* live forever *and* die an infinite number of times over. *Both...* At every point of your life when it was possible for you to die, you *do* die, and at every point when you could have survived, you *do* survive…

  But we may still ask whether the "we" or "you" in use here meaningfully references the subjects of life we recognize as *ours*? And, if these pronouns do reference something identifiable, it raises the question would a *forced* immortality be desirable to whom (or what) you (or we) take yourself (or ourselves) to be *now?* And this brings us back to the Makropolus problem.

Music

- "This Bitter Earth / On the Nature of Daylight (Max Richter)" – Joy Denalane, Daniel Hope, and Christoph Israel.

- "Celestial Music Gstaad - *Ciaccona di Paradiso e dell'Inferno* - English Lyrics." Philippe Jaroussky, Céline Scheen, with cornetto player Doron David Sherwin. Hilarious and brilliant! Directed by Christina Pluhar with L'Arpeggiata. Live concert at Kirche Saanen (Saanen Church), Switzerland, 2022.

Appendix: notes from and comments on:

1. Sophie Grace's "Staying alive"

Upshot: to show, on the grounds of the metaphysics of identity over time, that some future upgrade of me as an immortal being will not be the same person as me, is not in any way to show that I can have no reasonable concern for the future of that immortal being. Rather, what the argument is likely to show is, at most, that *personal identity* goes one way, and *what there is reason to care about the survival of as me* goes another.

But "reasonable concern for" is a very low bar for asserting immortality. I can easily imagine having "reasonable concern for" entities I would not think of having continuity with of any sort. Other persons, even strangers, even of other species, even inanimate ecosystems… may matter greatly to me, but I do not think their future well-being or integrity need have anything to do with a notion of immortality implicating me. (Never mind that we have strayed far from "psychological continuity" in talking about emanating empathy. These are not the same.)

…

> We naturally care for the futures of all sorts of beings with whom we are admittedly not identical, and in many cases we care for them in something strikingly like a first-personal way: our children are the obvious example.

This seems to entail that there are no limits to the human ability to take on personal concern for items in the universe to which we may imaginatively or causally entangle ourselves with. We can deeply identify with Napoleon or Jesus Christ or some microbe on a distant planet or Mickey Mouse or Gaia or the elements of the periodic table out of which my physical being is constituted – which, though these may survive me, physics tells us these elements were themselves not yet constituted at the Big Bang, or prior to God's whim at creation, or whatever theory explains the origin of everything. I am one with the universe or universes…

Yes, this does make purely logical sense (like a tautology does), but it is a *reductio* of logic itself insofar as logic pertains to logically-disabled humans. Chickens are not good general paradigm instances of birds. They fly only occasionally and for short stretches. Similarly with regard to humans and their use of reason. Logic-driven entities such as AI do better. If we think otherwise, it's because we confuse logic with intelligence. Intelligence does have something to do with meaningful survival; logic, stripped of non-logical imperatives (such as survival), does not.

2. James Warren's "Philosophy as a preparation for death in Plato's Phaedo"

> Soon after telling his audience that life and death are, respectively, the combination and separation of a body and a soul, Socrates adds the idea that philosophy is, in his words, 'a preparation for death'. There are various ways we might understand this. Perhaps philosophy offers a way of coming to terms with the fact that our lives will come to an end. Perhaps philosophy is a way of coming to terms with the fact that we will sometimes lose people we love. But Socrates explains a further important sense in which philosophy is a preparation for death.
>
> He means us to think that a philosophical life is one in which we try as much as possible to separate the soul from the body even while we are alive. This separation is to be achieved by, as far as possible, concentrating on cultivating one rather than the other of the two partners which make us living beings. We are to concentrate on cultivating the soul rather than the body. We are to train ourselves to be indifferent to physical pleasures and pains, to think less of the physical world in general and instead concentrate on our intellectual capacities and, as far as possible, not to be concerned with the changing and temporary things we perceive but with acquiring knowledge of eternal truths.
>
> Socrates himself is supposed to be an example of this 'philosophical life' in action. In various dialogues, Plato offers a portrait of what this sort of philosopher is like. He is indifferent to physical discomfort (e.g. he habitually walks barefoot and without warm clothing even in the depths of winter) and to physical pleasures (e.g. he generally is oblivious to the sexual advances of even the most attractive young men).[21] In short, Socrates concentrates on his soul and neglects his body. Even as a living human, the soul and body

21. Yes, he rebuffed Alcibiades overtures, but it should be pointed out that Socrates had, not one, but perhaps two female partners, his wife and her friend – and even a long relationship (perhaps Platonic, perhaps not entirely) with the most influential woman in Athens at the time, Pericles' consort, Aspasia, who, it's been argued, was the only other contemporary who might be considered his intellectual peer.

are as far as possible separated from one another.

…

Who wants to live for ever?

There are some thorny questions raised by this view and they touch on questions of what modern philosophers call 'personal identity'. What am I? What is it that guarantees that I am now the same person as the one who began writing this essay? When will I end? Plato characteristically leaves his reader to ponder the various possibilities which his work suggests so there are no easy answers to be lifted directly from his text.

But for now, let us return to a question I left hanging earlier: is Socrates' immortality an immortality worth wanting? The force of the question is as follows. Imagine that you accept that (i) philosophy is a preparation for death, that (ii) death is the separation of body and soul, and that (iii) the soul is immortal. Imagine also that Socrates has indeed come to the view that he is a soul and that the end of the *Phaedo* shows the moment when a purified soul is released from its bodily prison. To the extent that Socrates is that soul, then Socrates is indeed immortal.

But this is not immortality of the sort we might normally crave. The purified soul does not retain any memories from the life that has just ended or, it seems, any particular and personal characteristics of Socrates the living human and this might make us pause before accepting that the person or personality of Socrates continues after he drinks the hemlock. (By way of comparison, the soul imagined here is not at all, for example, like the shades of the dead which Odysseus meets in Odyssey 11, still bearing the grudges and concerns they had in life.) But surely this apparently impersonal continuity is not what we usually want if we want to be immortal. In short, Socrates wins immortality at the price of giving up any personal continuity after death. Socrates the soul may have been released from prison at the end of the *Phaedo*, but Socrates the man has most certainly died.

But it is the acceptance of this outcome that philosophy is preparation is for. Any other reaction to physical death is rooted animal fear. If all we ever are is pure animal, then, yes, this eventual acceptance (if it comes) is just a natural dispensation, perhaps available to those susceptible to being convinced they were something in addition to being animal. Philosophy in the service mercy killing. Without it we may be tempted to check out prematurely, before nature has its way with us, making us instruments of its inscrutable imperative: *survive*. The liability to acceptance may be a blind evolutionary development in the interest of survival. *Survival for what?* Once here, of course, we inherit the program. But why were we ever here?

And what convinced us we were ever purely animal? We have been, from the start, *programmed to be convinced* by one thing or another, first one, then another… and so forth.

3. Anders Sandberg's "The frightening infinite spaces: apeirophobia"

Sandberg thinks that fear of immortality or even indefinite life extension is ultimately rooted in a non-rational instinct, and thus cannot, in the end, be rationally justified. If life can be enjoyed at any moment, there is no *logical* reason why this moment could not be extended or repeated *ad infinitum*. He uses Pascal's famous apeirophobic claim as a starting point.

While “longevity is disturbing to me” is not a good argument, it is the motivator for finding arguments that can work in the social context. This is also why no amount of knocking down these arguments actually leads anywhere: the source is a coping strategy, not a rationally consistent position.

…

As I often have to point out, I do not believe immortality is a thing. We are finite beings in a random universe, and sooner or later our luck runs out. What to aim for is indefinitely long lives, lives that go on (with high probability) until we no longer find them meaningful. But even this tends to trigger apeirophobia. Maybe one reason is the indeterminacy: there is nothing pre-set at all.

Pascal’s worry seem to be not just the infinity of the spaces but also their arbitrariness and how insignificant we are relative to them. The full section of the *Pensées*:

> 205: When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, the little space which I fill, and even can see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant, and which know me not, I am frightened, and am astonished at being here rather than there; for there is no reason why here rather than there, why now rather than then. Who has put me here? By whose order and direction have this place and time been allotted to me? *Memoria hospitis unius diei prætereuntis*.
>
> 206: The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me.
>
> 207: How many kingdoms know us not!
>
> 208: Why is my knowledge limited? Why my stature? Why my life to one hundred years rather than to a thousand? What reason has nature had for giving me such, and for choosing this number rather than another in the infinity of those from which there is no more reason to choose one than another, trying nothing else?

Pascal is clearly unsettled by infinity and eternity, but in the Pensées he tries to resolve this psychologically: since he trusts God, then eternity must be a good thing even if it is hard to bear. This is a very different position from my interlocutor yesterday, who insisted that it was the warm finitude of a human life that gave life meaning (a view somewhat echoed in Mark O’Connell’s *To Be a Machine*). To Pascal apeirophobia was just another challenge to become a good Christian, to the mortalist it is actually a correct, value-tracking intuition.

…

Feeling apeirophobia does not tell us that infinity is bad, just as feeling xenophobia does not tell us that foreigners are bad.

…

Would people with apeirophobia have a better understanding of the value of infinity than somebody else? I suspect apeirophobes are on average smarter and/or have a higher need for cognition, but this does not imply that they get things right, just that they think more and

more deeply about concepts many people are happy to gloss over. There are many smart nonapeirophobes too.

A strong reason to be sceptical of apeirophobic intuitions is that intuitions tend to work well when we have plenty of experience to build them from, either evolutionarily or individually. Human practical physics intuitions are great for everyday objects and speeds, and progressively worsens as we reach relativistic or quantum scales. We do not encounter eternal life at all, and hence we should be very suspicious about the validity of apeirophobia as a truth-tracking innate signal. Rather, it is triggered when we become overwhelmed by the lack of references to infinity in our lived experience or we discover the arbitrarily extreme nature of "infinite issues" (anybody who has not experienced vertigo when they understood uncountable sets?) It is a correct signal that our minds are swimming above an abyss we do not know but it does not tell us what is in this abyss. Maybe it is nice down there? Given our human tendency to look more strongly for downsides and losses than positives we will tend to respond to this uncertainty by imagining diffuse worst case scenario monsters anyway.

That some people have this tendency (myself included), I believe. But I feel a vastly larger portion of the population is inclined to look on the bright side. Optimists far outnumber pessimists.[22] Would we have survived this long otherwise? This does not mean that the optimists are right, only that they are more directly functional. It behooves us not to give up too soon. We only need a few pessimists to help survival along: only a few to remind us that when we jump off a cliff we do not usually evolve wings on the way down.

…

My recommendation to apeirophobes is not to take Azarian's advice and put eternity out of mind, but instead to embrace it in a controllable way. …

I suspect Pascal would have been delighted if he knew this math. However, to him the essential part was how we turn intellectual meditation into emotional or existential equilibrium:

> Let us therefore not look for certainty and stability. Our reason is always deceived by fickle shadows; nothing can fix the finite between the two Infinites, which both enclose and fly from it.
>
> If this be well understood, I think that we shall remain at rest, each in the state wherein nature has placed him. As this sphere which has fallen to us as our lot is always distant from either extreme, what matters it that man should have a little more knowledge of the universe? If he has it, he but gets a little higher. Is he not always infinitely removed from the end, and is not the duration of our life equally removed from eternity, even if it lasts ten years longer?
>
> In comparison with these Infinites all finites are equal, and I see no reason for fixing our imagination on one more than on another. The only comparison which we make of ourselves to the finite is painful to us.

In the end it is we who make the infinite frightening or the finite painful. **[Or the reverse:**

22. I include optimist-wannabes. Sometimes I am not certain how serious they are.

the infinite consoling or the finite meaningful.] We can train ourselves to stop it. **[*Can*, but *should* we? If there is an imperative here, it seems, at best, aesthetic.]** We may need very long lives in order to grow to do it well, though.

But should we truly succeed at this "growth," it won't be "us" at the mature end of it. It is *prima facie* arbitrary to say the butterfly was once the caterpillar, when it is plain to see they do not even remotely resemble each other. The "non-identity across uncircumscribed change" problem looms. I may "grow into" something – or, less tendentiously, factor in the causal history of this "something" – but why should I identify enough to *care* about this "something"? Either there is a meaningful continuity across the transformation that requires explanation, or there isn't, in which case, identity fails and special concern for the result requires an explanation.

Sandberg's claim recalls Sophie Grace's above as to the logical conceivability of human perennial or indefinite contentment. Sandberg suggests we might revise ourselves to become more rational and less burdened with evolutionary legacies that may impede contentment. (As though "evolving" was like "coming of age.") But, like Sophie Grace, he does not address the more serious non-identity problem which, to be resolved, requires a stipulation about what identity consists in. Is it biophysical, psychological, heterocosmic, social construction, or what?[23]

Except stipulatory:

- **there is no such thing as *personal identity* biophysically (identity is a *logical* notion, not a physical one);**
- **psychologically, there can be but it is not unique;**
- **heterocosmically, it seems irrelevant; and,**
- **as social construction, it is not personal.**

You *are* as you go. As best we can make out.

Presentation notes

Intro

Topic: the appeal and fear of immortality

(This will not be a discussion of the possibility or actuality of living forever or indefinitely. This will be a discussion of the **desirability** of living indefinitely were it an option.)

1. Definitions:

- "immortality": in the strict sense of being forced or condemned to live or experience forever...

- "life extension": having the option to live as long as you want, but not under compulsion

- "afterlife": in Samuel Scheffler's sense: the extent to which the life that comes *after* yours (or

23. For more discussion on non-identity as it relates to existential questions, see "Existential Risk and AI Governance."

before) is continuous with yours and so concerns you. The suggestion here is that what we call life does not begin sharply with our birth or conception and does end sharply with your last breath.

We are going to focus mainly on the second understanding, although much of we say will apply to the first the strict forced sort of immortality. I will loosely mean the first and second understandings in my use of the word "immortality" in this discussion.

2. Makropulos Affair Before we get into the real philosophical issues with immortality, we are going to illustrate some of the problems with immortality or life extension by discussing the play by Karel Čapek The Makropulos Affair.

3. Survey about What people think about immortality

4. Bernard Williams 1970s paper that sparked an ongoing debate about the desirability of immortality:

- boredom, and

- non-identity

- the case of Teiresias illustrates

How solving one of these problems leads to the other.

5. Vampire logic

6. Counter arguments: Grace and Sandberg: the pure logical conceivability of eternal contentment does not seem problematic. If we are afraid of the eternal, the infinite, the idea of immortality, this seems irrational to some thinkers... Why can't we just train ourselves to be more rational? Why can't we overcome of evolutionarily conditioned fear of indefinite life extension --apeirophobia?

7. Wittgenstein

How the language we use is rooted in everyday usage. We have no everyday usage for terms like "infinite," "eternal" or "forever". These are abstractions developed within fields like mathematics and theoretical physics. Or from religion which is ultimately concerned with guidance and consolation to face the harshness of reality. So it can't be too surprising that we seem confused about immortality. Since whatever the term refers to isn't a reality we have communicable experiences of. We can only gesture at this incommunicable, the way art, poetry, and music do. Wittgenstein, for one, does not denigrate the incommunicable, but his whole philosophy was about rubbing our nose in its incommunicableness. We have only gestures, hand-waving, and the hope that others can imagine what we mean...

8. Final thoughts

"Get the calculation wrong and we die too soon or too late. The *right* moment to die is the instant *before* you *want* to die. As Cioran, put it, this is the reason for a suicide's failure. An eternal life would be to risk this failure forever."

Post discussion: a paradox about boredom and intelligence

A comment from Mary on boredom and imagination prompted me to the think about the relation between boredom and intelligence. I think Wendell also seemed to share Mary's intuition about this. They didn't seem to see boredom as a fatal obstacle to eternal engagement.

In the *Makropulos Affair* play and in Bernard Williams' essay about it and many other places, there's an underlying assumption that people (and animals) with relatively high intelligence are more susceptible to boredom than those with less. Creatures capable of only a small repertoire of activities need less stimulation and opportunities for engagement. They can seem content with less variety in their experiences. Thus caged animals and sensory deprivation in humans can suffer psychological damage. Why do we put criminals in prison? It can't be because being locked up is supposed exciting and enjoyable. Čapek in his play assumed this about human nature and it is why boredom was understood as a real potential threat to the desirability of eternal life – because we are constitutionally liable to eventually coming to experience unending life as confining. This assumption is pretty widespread but there is another view on the matter that seems to contradict it.

Boredom can also be a spur to imagination, a challenge to overcome. A highly intelligent individual will find interest and engagement in whatever the world presents to them precisely because of their intelligence even when that world offers them very little. *Successfully* making a mountain out of molehill requires substantial imagination and intelligence. Meaning and purpose can be extracted from minimal resources for such people... To say that there is a floor to how little is necessary for contentment is to deny these human capabilities. I think something like this motivates those who do not see boredom as a fatal impediment to finding some kind of contentment in eternal experience. John Martin Fischer, in his interview, and the essays by Sophie Grace and Anders Sandberg, I think, show that this intuition drives their more optimistic view on the idea of immortality or the eternal.

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Certain existentialists, like Samuel Beckett and E. M. Cioran, even seem to revel in the dearth of meaning in a finite life. Their bleak humor thrives on it. I can only imagine what a riot they would find an eternal one to be...

"They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more."
– Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*

"It is not worth the bother of killing yourself, since you always kill yourself too late."
– E. M. Cioran, *The Trouble With Being Born*

Boredom and immortality

Boredom is a consequence of mortality, of our finite duration. We speculate its evolutionary

function is to remind us we don't have all the time in the world. It is an anxious reminder of a background urgency, an insistence: if we have things to do, we should get on with them. Find something more engaging, at least remotely connected with making progress toward an end, even if it is sleep, rest, recreation, etc., it should be at least preparatory, if not constructive, toward fulfilling that end. Even if the end is vague or less than fully conscious, mortality is the source of the urgency, and boredom a mechanism through which the urgency is expressed.

What function could boredom serve for non-finite consciousnesses? Where literally "all the time in the world" is available? Boredom for mortals is at least discomfiting, a negative experience. It is relieved by redirecting attention toward goal relevant activity. Goals are *ends*: they have denouements. These are time-defined, they occur at the end of stretches of time, circumscribed by limitation. Mortality is the ultimate and universal limitation of finite consciousness as we know it. What "end" could an immortal being have? "More of the same" is the most we may imagine – *while preserving a semblance of identity.*

Thus, boredom for an immortal would be functionless, potentially rising to eternal torment. The urgency that mortality provides is absent. Distract yourself or don't distract yourself – what difference could it make?… Again, *while preserving a semblance of identity:* the identity formulated by mortals when they were mortals under the conditions of mortality. The very concept of identity is about what something is *not*. About delimiting boundaries. Boundaries evaporate for the infinite, the eternal, the never-ending…

Drop the requirement of identity, and we are *already* immortal.

Extended writeup for the topic hosted at [The Philosophy Club](#) in February 2026
Accessible at [Archive.org](#)

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